

## INTRODUCTION

*On les a nommés Sceptiques, Zététiques, Ephectiques, Aporétiques, c'est-à-dire examinateurs, inquisiteurs, suspendants, doutants. Tout cela montre qu'ils supposaient qu'il était possible de trouver la vérité, et qu'ils ne décidaient pas qu'elle était incompréhensible.*

Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, art. Pyrrhon, rem. A.

The history of modern scepticism is an active and on-going research-in-progress. Respectively forty-two and thirty years have passed since the two great works that laid the foundations for this research first saw the light (*History of Scepticism* by Richard H. Popkin and *Cicero scepticus* by Charles B. Schmitt) and interest in this field has not yet run its course. Quite the reverse: studies, congresses, collective works on the subject are multiplying, while historical reconstruction extends to include new personalities, new periods, new sources. This is not the place for even a brief overview of these many and varied activities. Suffice it to say that over the last twenty years Popkin has promoted a series of congresses that have expanded the horizons to include the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the history of

scepticism, as well as many aspects of the contemporary age.<sup>1</sup> He has also extended the field of research to include irreligion, religious scepticism, freethinking, prophetism and mysticism.<sup>2</sup> Over recent years a series of monographic studies have also examined the themes of modern scepticism or some of its fundamental points,<sup>3</sup> and collective works have taken different perspectives on many other aspects of this history, attenuating the significance of the religious links that did accompany it during certain

<sup>1</sup> Popkin, Richard H. and Schmitt, Charles B., eds., *Scepticism from Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987; Popkin, R.H., *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought*. Leiden-New York-Köbenhavn-Köln: Brill, 1992; Popkin, R.H., ed., *Scepticism in the History of Philosophy. A Pan-American Dialogue*. Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 1996; Popkin, R.H., de Olaso, E., Tonelli, G., eds., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment*. Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 1997; van der Zande, J., and Popkin, R.H., eds., *The Skeptical Tradition around 1800*. Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 1998. To these works we should add the collection of essays by Popkin himself: *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*. San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980, and works that have been dedicated to him: Watson, R.A. and Force, J.E., eds., *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy. Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin*. Dordrecht-Boston-Lancaster: Nijhoff, 1988; Force, J.E., and Katz, D.S., eds., *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin. Essays in His Honor*. Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 1999. The Proceedings of the recent Los Angeles Congress are also forthcoming as: Popkin, R.H. and Maia Neto, J.R., eds., *Scepticism as a Force in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought*. Amherst: Prometheus Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Popkin, R.H. and Vanderjagt, A., eds., *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Leiden-New York-Köln: Brill, 1993; Popkin, R.H., Berti, S. and Charles-Daubert, F., eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free-Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to mention the works published over the last decade: Paganini, Gianni, *Scepti moderna. Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da Charron a Hume*. Cosenza: Busento, 1991; Laursen, John Christian, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant*. Leiden-New York-Köln: E.J. Brill, 1992; Taranto, Domenico, *Pirronismo ed assolutismo nella Francia del '600. Studi sul pensiero politico dello scetticismo da Montaigne a Bayle (1580-1697)*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1994; Maia Neto, José R., *The Christianization of Pyrrhonism. Scepticism and Faith in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Shestov*. Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 1995; Mori, Gianluca, *Bayle philosophe*. Paris: Champion, 1999; Gregory, Tullio, *Genèse de la raison classique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000; Brahami, Frédéric, *Le Travail du scepticisme. Montaigne, Bayle, Hume*. Paris: Puf 2001; Giocanti, Sylvia, *Penser l'irrésolution. Montaigne, Pascal La Mothe Le Vayer. Trois itinéraires sceptiques*. Paris: Champion 2001; Foucault, D. and Cavaillé, J.-P., eds., *Sources antiques de l'irreligion moderne: le relais italien. XI<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Toulouse-Le Mirail: Collection de l'E.C.R.I.T., n. 6, 2001; Floridi, Luciano, *Sextus Empiricus. The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. See also the collection *Libertinage et philosophie au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. by Antony McKenna and Pierre-François Moreau, of which the first five volumes have already been published: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne 1996 – 2001, and the extensive thesis by Emmanuel Naya, *Le Phénomène pyrrhonien: lire le scepticisme au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Doctoral Thesis: Université Stendhal Grenoble-III, 2000).

phases.<sup>4</sup> In-depth studies of erudite libertinism and the publication of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century clandestine philosophical manuscripts have also corrected the overemphasised identification of the history of scepticism with fideism. They have brought to light in its stead the critical, anti-religious contribution made by sceptical schools of thought. Many were the results produced by modern scepticism: not only the leap to faith or the opening to super-rational dimensions, but also atheist negation, the critique of positive religions, the critical history of revelations, the elaboration of deism and the doctrine of natural religion.<sup>5</sup>

From this research process, modern scepticism emerges in an increasingly complex and interconnected form; it is interwoven with the most innovative scientific, political, religious, and cultural experiences of Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its unitary characteristics are of course easily recognisable, in that it relates to a well-defined *corpus* of ancient works (first and foremost the writings of Sextus Empiricus, but also those of Cicero, the doxographies of Diogenes Laertius, the anti-sceptical polemics of the Church Fathers, among whom Lactantius and Augustine clearly stand

<sup>4</sup> Kreimendhal, Lothar, *Aufklärung und Skepsis. Studien zur Philosophie und Geistesgeschichte des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Festschrift G. Gawlick). Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995; Moreau, P.-F., ed., *Le Scepticisme au XVI<sup>e</sup> et au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Paris: A. Michel, 2001; Paganini, G., Benítez, M., Dybikowski, J., eds., *Scepticisme, Clandestinité et Libre Pensée / Scepticism, Clandestinity and Free-Thinking*. Paris: Champion, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview: Paganini, Gianni, *Haupttendenzen der clandestinen Philosophie, in Ueberwegs Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie, Die Philosophie des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Band I. Hrsg. v. Jean-Pierre Schobinger. Teil I "Allgemeine Themen", Basel: Schwabe, 1998, pp. 121-196 (with a complete bibliography). In recent years, two collections have been created to publish texts and studies: the first "Libre pensée et littérature clandestine" (edited by Antony McKenna), at the Voltaire Foundation and then at Champion (Paris); the second, "Philosophische Clandestina der deutschen Aufklärung", directed by Winfried Schröder, at Frommann-Holzboog (Stuttgart). See in the first collection the recent work by Sorbière, Samuel, *Discours sceptiques*, critical edition by Sophie Gouverneur. Paris: Champion, 2002. The specialised journal, *La Lettre clandestine*, has reached no. 10 (2001), significantly dedicated to the theme *Le doute philosophique: philosophie classique et littérature clandestine*. The role of scepticism in the birth of modern atheism is amply covered by Winfried Schröder (*Ursprünge des Atheismus. Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998) and for the early eighteenth century in Germany by Martin Mulsow (*Moderne aus dem Untergrund. Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680-1720*. Hamburg: Meiner, 2002). For the French scenario see the large-scale historical reconstruction by Antony McKenna: *De Pascal à Voltaire. Le rôle des 'Pensées' de Pascal dans l'histoire des idées entre 1670 et 1734*, 2 vols. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1990 and the recent volume by Jean-Pierre Cavaillé: *Dis/simulations. Religion, morale et politique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Champion, 2002. See also: Benítez, M., McKenna, A., Paganini, G., Salem, J., eds., *Materia actiosa. Antiquité, Age classique, Lumières*. Paris: Champion, 2000.

out, to mention only the principal names). Nevertheless, modern scepticism presents a wide variety of approaches and solutions that are profoundly conditioned by the different cultural and philosophical strategies in which it developed. Almost never found in a “pure” state, scepticism blended with many other elements of the intellectual scene and took on many different values depending on the different constellations it entered into. Rather than an isolated element, we should speak of so many molecular aggregations, in which the common characteristics are compensated and blurred by deep specific differences. Rather than a single genus defined by an impossible essential unity, we should speak in the plural of *scepticisms*. Rather than concentrating on an essence that, as such, has never existed, we should instead stick to the concrete nature and variety of historical processes.

This book is an exploration of the plurality of forms that scepticism has taken on in the modern age; it comprises the Proceedings of the International Conference held at the University of Eastern Piedmont at Vercelli (May 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>, 2000). The period examined ranges from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when scepticism was already affirmed as one of the fundamental components of the philosophical scene, to the time of Bayle (with some extensions into the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the debate on scepticism was profoundly influenced by Bayle’s approach).

In his “Opening Address”, which was read at the beginning of the Conference, Richard H. Popkin (who was unable to be present for reasons of health) traced the *agenda* of his studies and listed a series of *desiderata* for the history of scepticism. After retracing the outlines of the revision he has been working on in preparation for the third edition of his *History*, he indicated some lines of research that still remain to be explored. These include the influence on sceptical themes of theological conceptions such as the idea of divine omnipotence (a scepticism that starts in heaven, “in contrast to the Pyrrhonian scepticism that began and flourished on earth”), the relationships between learned scepticism and popular scepticism, the various forms of “mystic” scepticism, the methodological problems raised by a reconstruction that is chiefly contextual or belonging to the “history of ideas”.

The book is subdivided into seven sections. The first section (“The English Context: from Hobbes to Locke”) looks at the British scene. There is a tendency among historians to present Descartes’s interpretation and solution of sceptical doubt as the dominant one, or in any case the most significant one in modern thought. As often happens in history, it is the adversary who speaks for his antagonist and thus fixes his shape for posterity, especially when he proclaims himself the true or presumed winner. Thus it was for the history of heresy and religious sects, but the same happened to those other “sects”, no less pugnacious and quarrelsome: the

philosophical schools. As Descartes's version imposed itself, scepticism was reduced to an epistemological obstacle to be overcome in the light of scientific and metaphysical certainty. But we have only to change context, from Descartes's France to anti-Cartesian England, and the scene radically changes with regard to the *vulgata*. Ways of treating and utilising scepticism that were profoundly different from those proposed by the author of *Meditationes* were not only possible, they were practised.

The cases studied in this section are emblematic. Hobbes's phenomenalistic interpretation (examined in the essay by Gianni Paganini) is rooted in an interpretation of the Pyrrhonian "phenomenon" as defined by Sextus and taken up again by Montaigne, yet it also distances itself from Descartes's metaphysical-substantialistic approach. It is however clear that Hobbes's reading is compatible with his "philosophia prima". Some particular features of Sextus's tropology (in particular the trope of mixture) were joined in this blend together with the interpretation of the sensible phenomenon contained in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Hobbes's philosophy thus also takes up the challenge of sceptical doubt, but his solution to it moves in the opposite direction to that taken by Descartes: he redefines the notion of essence, breaks down the body into the sum of its accidents and limits himself to distinguishing between those that are durable and those that are transient. The essay by G.A.J. Rogers fills another important gap in the history of scepticism: the role played by John Locke who – like the Pyrrhonians – began from phenomena, calling them ideas, and considered it a natural and foregone conclusion that important areas of knowledge are not susceptible to certainty. Although Locke never quotes Pyrrho, he made a concrete contribution to creating a vision of man's place in the universe that takes into account his limited understanding of reality. Despite their proud aversion to scepticism, More and Cudworth also made use of it to achieve a subtler subdivision of the levels and planes of knowledge, distinguishing between existence and conceivability and pointing out the role of conjecture. The essay by Francesco Tomasoni, centred around the Cambridge Platonists, examines this hypothetical knowledge (very different from that of Hobbes, though he, too, utilised the notion of hypothesis).

With the second section ("Descartes and his context") emphasis returns to the continent. However, the interpretation of scepticism that emerges reveals one of its original values: not simply a test to pass so as to reach the foundation of metaphysics, or a temporary guide for the philosopher (above all in morality and politics) before he can achieve the desired certainty, but rather a primary source of precise Cartesian arguments. Thus José R. Maia Neto shows that the *cogito* may be seen as a metaphysical interpretation of Charron's *epoché* resulting from Cartesian hyperbolic doubt and that it is Charron's Academic version of scepticism (and not Montaigne's "que sais-

The Return of Scepticism

From Hobbes and Descartes to Bayle

Paganini, G. (Ed.)

2003, XXVIII, 495 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1377-5